Holy Image, Sacred Presence
Icons in Holy Russia

The icon, a form of holy image first documented in the second-century Roman Empire, is integral to Orthodox Christian worship and everyday life. The Russian icons exhibited here date mainly from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. They represent "portraits" of Christ and the saints as vehicles for prayer, and also narratives of the major feast-days that re-enact the history of the Christian faith.

Orthodox theologians such as Theodore the Studite (759–826) argued that the believer did not worship a material object but instead venerated the figures whose presence was evoked by the icon. That is, icons are a point of access to the sacred. The icon's efficacy depended on the perceived authenticity of the likeness; thus, traditional depiction was favored over innovation, and copying venerable models was considered a virtue.

After the Kievan prince Vladimir converted to Orthodox Christianity in 988, icons and image-veneration practices from Byzantium were adopted in the Kievan Rus and the later Russian state. Early Russian icons conformed to Byzantine types, but Russian icon painters developed their own distinct styles and introduced new themes and local saints. As early as the mid-seventeenth century, individual icon painters such as Simon Ushekov began to paint in a more illusionistic style following European models, but it was particularly under Tsar Peter the Great (1772–25) that Russian icon painters were officially encouraged to embrace European artistic traditions. Traditional icons were still made for more conservative believers.

The 1917 Russian Revolution temporarily disrupted Russian Orthodox culture. The Bolsheviks saw icons as a reminder of the Tsarist past and removed them from churches to be displayed as "art" in museums. Later, Western-style icons and contemporary copies of earlier icons, sometimes "antiqued" to make them appear older, were sold to foreigners to support the Soviet economy. In the 1930s Americans began collecting the later Russian icons sold in government shops, and at this time the core of the Chazen's icon collection was acquired by Joseph E. Davies, American ambassador to the Soviet Union (1937–38).

Icon traditions, kept alive by émigrés in Europe and the United States, were vigorously revived in Russia after the Soviet Union collapsed. The sentiments expressed by a Russian iconophile in 1915 might apply to the today's icon culture:

"A foreigner will remain unmoved before these icons, whereas we are overcome by their mysterious power. Because before these icons, or ones like them, the souls of our forebears poured out their most powerful feelings, because before them they experienced rare flashes of great joy and powerful waves of that great sorrow that faith and faith alone could help them beat."